DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 204 934 EC 133 501

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TITLE	Overcoming Communication Barriers: A Cooperative Action Planning Workshop for Parents and Educators of Exceptional Children.
INSTITUTION	ERIC Clearinghouse on Handicapped and Gifted Children, Reston, Va.
SPONS AGENCY	National Inst. of Education (ED), Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE	Jun 81
CONTRACT	400-76-0119
NOTE	31p.: A part of the ERIC Exceptional Child Education Report Series, IAP No. 80-8.
AVAILABLE FROM	ERIC Clearinghouse on Handicapped and Gifted Children, The Council for Exceptional Children, 1920 Association Dr., Reston, VA 22091 ($1.00 for handling while supply lasts).
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Communication Skills: *Disabilities: Elementary Secondary Education: *Gifted: Parent Attitudes: *Parent Teacher Cooperation: Teacher Attitudes: Workshops

ABSTRACT

Instructions are given for conducting a workshop to enhance communication between parents of exceptional children and educators. Ten activities, designed for a day long workshop, are broken down in terms of time, description, purpose, setting, materials, and methods. Among suggestions are activities to identify and prioritize areas of common concern, discuss development of action plans, and formulate action plans. (CL)

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ED204934

OVERCOMING COMMUNICATION BARRIERS:

A COOPERATIVE ACTION PLANNING WORKSHOP

FOR PARENTS AND EDUCATORS OF EXCEPTIONAL CHILDREN

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June 1981

A Product of the ERIC Clearinghouse on Handicapped and Gifted Children
The Council for Exceptional Children
1920 Association Drive
Reston, Virginia 22091

EC133501

A publication of the ERIC Clearinghouse on Handicapped and Gifted Children. Publication Date, 1981.

The Council for Exceptional Children, 1920 Association Drive, Reston, Virginia 22091

This publication was prepared with funding from the National Institute of Education, US Department of Education, under contract no. 400-76-0119. Contractors undertaking such projects under government sponsorship are encouraged to express freely their judgment in professional and technical matters. Prior to publication, the manuscript was submitted to The Council for Exceptional Children for critical review and determination of professional competence. This publication has met such standards. Points of view, however, do not necessarily represent the official view or opinions of either The Council for Exceptional Children, the National Institute of Education, or the Department of Education.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Council for Exceptional Children and Closer Look wish to express their sincere thanks to the Charlton, Delaware Chapter of The Council for Exceptional Children for their leadership and cooperation in arranging for the field testing of this workshop. Special appreciation is extended to the Program Steering Committee's Co-chairpersons Barbara Sturm and Sara Howard. Other Committee members who gave of their time and energy were Rich Comly, Sondra McKinney, Joanne Quillen, and Beth Sauchenitz. Appreciation is also extended to participants Tom Amrhein, Allen Blodgett, Mr. and Mrs. David Campbell, Mary Hull, Tonya Newman, Carol Smith, and Isabel Ward. William LeClere acted as a consultant on the design of the workshop curriculum; we express our sincere thanks for his valuable ideas and suggestions.

Susan Gorin and Jean Nazzaro
The Council for Exceptional Children

Mary Lowry and Barbara Scheiber
Closer Look

PLANNING THE WORKSHOP

The initiative for planning this workshop may start with either educators or parents but it is important that representatives from both parent and educator groups be included on the program steering committee. The more involvement by members of these two groups the better, especially in an equal and cooperative manner.

Steering Committee

The Steering Committee should be comprised of an equal number of parents and professionals. Three to five of each group would be best. They will be the ones to plan, communicate, and then implement the workshop. Therefore, they should be selected based on their willingness to take responsibility, their availability of time, and their rapport with members of their prospective group. (When professional associations and parent coalitions are the groups to organize such a workshop, the officers or leaders of such groups may form the Steering Committee.)

The following is a checklist of decisions the Steering Committee must make in planning this activity:

- When will it take place? By including parents on the Steering Committee, the workshop is less likely to be scheduled at a time that conflicts with other major community events.

- Where will it be held? Educators tend to schedule meetings in the school facilities but parents may find other settings more neutral and, therefore, more conducive to open communication.

- Who should attend? The Steering Committee must decide who, other than parents and teachers, should participate in the workshop, e.g., principals, psychologists, speech therapists, etc.

- How should the workshop be announced? Once it has been determined who is to attend, the Steering Committee should brainstorm ways to inform people that the event will take place. The committee may choose to telephone potential participants and then follow up with written communication or they may choose to begin with a letter followed by a telephone call. Announcements may be made through school newspapers, local town newspapers, or local radio stations. Decisions related to who should attend and how to announce the workshop will depend on what the group hopes the workshop will accomplish.

Target Audience

The workshop is appropriate for any group of parents and educators who want to improve their communication with each other. Sample target audiences include:

- Parents whose handicapped children are in regular or special classrooms, regular teachers, and special education teachers.
- Parents of gifted children and all school personnel involved in gifted programs.
- Parents of learning disabled children and all school personnel (resource teachers and other special education teachers, regular teachers, school psychologists, principals, etc.) involved in the delivery of services to learning disabled children.
- Foster parents, group home counselors, and professional staff from institutional facilities.

Workshop Leader

The Steering Committee should select one person to be the workshop leader. This person will actually stand up in front of the group and lead the activities. If the committee prefers, two leaders can share the job.

It is important for the leader to be able to balance the concerns of both parents and educators. He or she should be skilled at neutralizing potentially threatening statements. He or she must be skilled at pacing the activities and keeping within the time limits. The workshop leader must be thoroughly familiar with all workshop activities and be personally responsible for making sure that all details associated with the actual workshop presentation have been attended to (e.g., flip charts, markers, paper and pencils, duplication of handouts, etc.).

Facilitators

Though it is not essential, it will be helpful if the workshop leader(s) work with one or two facilitators, both of whom will help lead the sessions, assist participants in carrying out activities, list major points on flip charts, etc. Facilitators, like the workshop leader, should be perceived as fair and concerned with the needs of both parents and educators. In most cases, it will help to have one facilitator who is a parent and one who is an educator (not an absolute rule).

Setting

Tables and chairs should be set up in a way that is conducive to informal, relaxed communication. Participants may be seated around tables, in groups of about 5, so that leaders are visible from all seats. Or, a horseshoe arrangement, with leaders at a table facing the group, can work out well. Participants should not, if at all possible, be seated in rows. There should be sufficient space in the workshop area for participants to meet in separate groups during certain exercises, without being disturbed.

PROCEDURES: OVERVIEW OF THE WORKSHOP

Time	Activity	Description	Purpose	Setting	Materials
15 min.	Welcome, Overview and Introductions	Overview of the purposes of the workshop. Introductions by leaders and participants.	To reconfirm and clarify what is to be accomplished. To begin to get to know one another.	Total Group	None
15 min. (optional activity)	Climate Setting	Practice exercises involving brief discussions and selection of significant points.	To relax participants and to encourage open discussion.	Small Groups	Paper and pencils.
30 min.	Sharing Concerns	Discussion aimed at generating a list of problem areas.	To identify problems that impede productive communication.	One group of parents; one group of educators	Flip charts and felt markers
15 min.	Break				
30 min.	Reporting	Presentation of problem areas.	To share the identified problem areas with the total group.	Total Group	Lists of problems recorded on flip chart
30 min.	Selecting Common Concerns	Selection of concerns common to both groups.	To identify clear areas of common concern that can serve as the basis for problem solving.	Total Group	Flip charts and felt markers
15 min.	Ranking	Selection of greatest concerns.	To narrow the number of common concerns for which participants will develop action plans.	Individual	Paper and pencils
45 min.	Lunch				
15 min.	Reporting Results of Ranking	Presentations of highest ranked concerns.	To identify the problems the majority of the group selected as primary concerns.	Total Group	Chart listing Greatest Concerns
15 min.	Transition	Description of how to develop action plans.	To describe the components of an action plan.	Total Group	Handout of action plan components
60 min.	Planning to improve communication	Developing action plans.	To prepare a detailed outline of action that will be undertaken to alleviate a specific problem.	Small Groups	Paper, pencils, flip chart, felt markers
30 min.	Final Reporting and Summary	Presentation of action plans.	To share each action plan with the total group.	Total Group	Flip charts and felt markers

Activity:	Overview and Introductions
Time:	15 minutes
Description:	Workshop leader gives a brief overview of the purposes of the workshop. Getting acquainted introductions by leaders and participants.
Purpose:	To reconfirm and clarify what is to be accomplished and to begin to get to know one another.
Setting:	Total group
Materials:	None
Method:	The workshop leader greets the participants and gives a brief description of the purpose of the workshop, namely to enhance cooperative relationships between parents and educators by communicating with each other about problems of common concern and developing an action plan to alleviate one or more of those problems. He or she describes the "style" of the workshop and types of exercises that will be carried out, reassuring participants that no activities will make them feel uncomfortable. Introductions should begin with the workshop leader(s) and should include information about his or her experience with exceptional children. Parents should tell a little about their child. Educators should talk about their role in school and the nature of the children they work with. From the beginning, the workshop leader should use first names and should make a statement that this will be done to foster a more informal atmosphere. (It helps to use name tags, and to have each person identify himself by name when he speaks so that the group gets to know one another as quickly as possible.)

Activity: Climate Setting (This activity is optional.)

Time: 15 minutes

Description: The workshop leader presents some practice exercises involving brief discussions and selection of significant points.

Purpose: To relax participants and to encourage open discussion.

Setting: Small groups

Materials: Paper and pencils

Method: The workshop leader explains that this activity is designed to get people relaxed. There are no correct or incorrect answers to the exercises. The group will be divided into subgroups based on the criteria stated in each exercise.

Exercise 1: Have participants choose a group based on the age of the children they are most concerned about. As you give the age groups, designate a corner or table at which the group should gather. For example, convene the 0-4 age group at one table, the 5-9 at another, the 10-14 at a third, and the 15-18 at a fourth. Ask participants to take a few minutes to discuss the most satisfying thing about the children in that age group. Allow 4 minutes for discussion, signaling when time is up. Ask a representative of each group to report one especially interesting thing that was identified.

Exercise 2: Have participants regroup according to their own birth order in their family: Oldest, Middle, Youngest, Only Child. Ask them to explore how their own birth order has affected them or made them the individuals they are. For example, are they bossier? More independent? Repeat the criteria and give the location for each group. Allow 4 minutes for discussion and 1 minute for a brief report from each group. Call participants back to the larger group.

Activity: Sharing Concerns: Things We Do and Don't Do

Time: 30 minutes

Description: Small group discussion aimed at generating a list of problem areas.

Purpose: To identify problems that are barriers to productive communication.

Setting: One group made up entirely of parents, one of teachers and other professionals.

Materials: Flip charts, felt markers

Method: The workshop leader might begin by saying, "We all recognize that we sometimes have ideas or do certain things that keep us from working together. It certainly is not planned or deliberate but does cause problems. During this activity we will generate a list of some things that we do that may prevent parents and educators from cooperating effectively for the good of the children. Please feel free to list anything that comes to mind. We are not here to judge but rather to find ways to work together for children."

- Divide participants into separate groups—one of parents, one of teachers and, if represented in large enough numbers, therapists, diagnosticians, principals, etc.
- Ask parents to identify specific things they do that do <u>not</u> contribute to working with educators in <u>the most effective way possible</u>.
- Ask educators to do the same.
- Have each group choose a spokesperson who will write responses on a flip chart and later present the list to the total group.
- Each person in the group should list at least one thing.
- Repeat the activity, asking for things they do that <u>do</u> contribute to cooperation between parents and professionals.

Rules: Parents and teachers should talk only about <u>themselves</u>, and not about what the other group does or doesn't do. This is not a blaming session. Each person should talk only about his or her own behavior.

The small group spokespersons should serve as recorders and make sure that the language they write down is "OK" with the person who made the statement.

Activity:	**Reporting**
Time:	**30 minutes**
Description:	**Group spokespersons present problem areas identified by their groups.**
Purpose:	**To share identified problem areas with the other groups.**
Setting:	**Total group**
Materials:	**Flip charts, felt markers**
Method:	**Just before this activity, spokespersons should be chosen to report their group's concerns about things that hinder cooperation (as well as those things they've identified that foster cooperation). Display the lists that each group has developed and ask the spokespersons to provide a narrative about their group's discussion and the ideas on the list. Group members should be encouraged to clarify ideas if they wish. This discussion could involve sensitive areas. The workshop leader(s) and facilitators must be aware of the group's reaction and provide support to those who need it. Don't forget to discuss the areas of cooperation.**

Sample lists generated by parents and teachers who participated in field testing this workshop are presented on pages 16 and 17.

Activity:	Selecting
Time:	30 minutes
Description:	Workshop leader records concerns common to groups.
Purpose:	To identify clear areas of common concerns that can serve as the basis for problem solving.
Setting:	Total group
Materials:	Flip chart, felt marker
Method:	Using the concerns raised by the groups, have the total group decide which of the concerns or "problem areas" are common to all groups. Although the wording may be different, if the idea is basically the same, list the concern on the chart labeled "Common Concerns." See page 18 for a sample list of common concerns. The hope is that many of the concerns will be common ones. The workshop leader might ask, "Does the list of common concerns begin to explain why barriers exist between parents and educators who are trying to work together?" If "communication" does not surface as an issue, it may be suggested by the workshop leader. The workshop leader should get consensus from both groups before placing something on the "common" list.

Activity:	Ranking
Time:	15 minutes
Description:	Participants select items of greatest concern to them from the list of common concerns.
Purpose:	To narrow the number of common concerns for which the participants will develop action plans.
Setting:	Individual
Materials:	Paper and pencils for each participant
Method:	Display the list of common concerns. Each concern should be numbered or coded so that it can be identified in an abbreviated form. Ask participants to select their top five concerns and to write them down in order of priority with their most serious concern listed first. Stress that, given the time constraints of this workshop, not all concerns can be addressed. Therefore, their ranking will help pinpoint the most critical issues or concerns. (See page 18 for a sample list of Greatest Concerns.)

Activity: Lunch

Time: 45 minutes

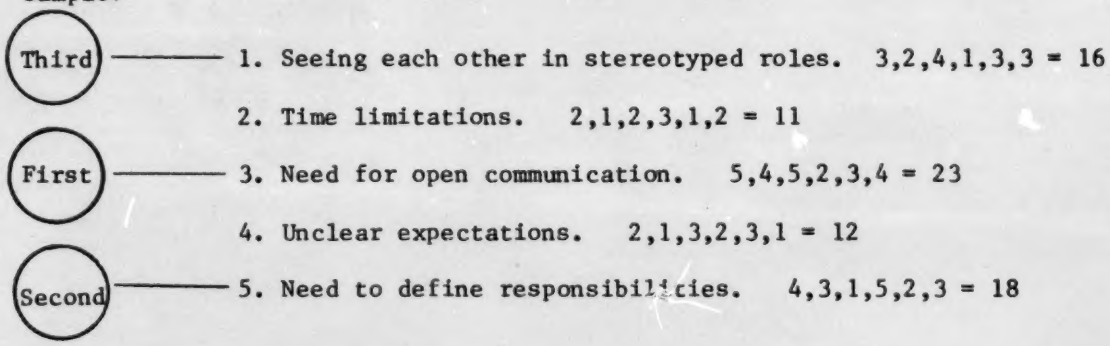
The time for lunch remains flexible so that the morning's schedule can be adjusted if necessary. Encourage the participants to mix during the lunch period. The facilitators should split up too!

Before the facilitators join the group for lunch, they will need to tabulate the ranking of concerns and write the group's top three to five concerns on flip charts to get ready for the afternoon activities.

How to Determine Areas of Greatest Concern

For each individual's list, assign a value of 5 to the concern listed first, 4 to the second concern, and so on. Using a master list of common concerns, write the rank from each participant's list next to the corresponding concern. When the ranks have all been recorded on the master list, add together the numbers for each item. The item with the highest cumulative rank may be assumed to be of greatest concern to the group as a whole.

Sample:


Third
1. Seeing each other in stereotyped roles. 3,2,4,1,3,3 = 16
2. Time limitations. 2,1,2,3,1,2 = 11
First
3. Need for open communication. 5,4,5,2,3,4 = 23
4. Unclear expectations. 2,1,3,2,3,1 = 12
Second
5. Need to define responsibilities. 4,3,1,5,2,3 = 18

Activity:	Reporting Results of Ranking
Time:	15 minutes (flexible)
Description:	Workshop leader presents the highest ranked concerns.
Purpose:	To identify the problems the majority of the group identified as primary concerns.
Setting:	Total group
Materials:	Chart listing Greatest Concerns
Method:	Describe the method used to select the top concerns. Allow the group to discuss the results of the ranking and to come to a consensus about the concerns to be addressed during the remainder of the workshop. Lunch may serve as an incubation period at which time additional concerns may emerge. If there is a strong feeling that something else should be added to the list, do so. The last item on the list of Greatest Concerns (see page 18) emerged during the lunch discussions from the group that field tested the workshop. It was originally on the parents' list but, because participants felt a strong need to work on this problem, it was added to the list of Greatest Concerns. This is also a good time to consolidate concerns, to eliminate those that duplicate, and to rephrase some that now seem to fit into one or more of the Greatest Concerns.

Activity:	Transition
Time:	15 minutes
Description:	Workshop leader describes how to develop an action plan.
Purpose:	To describe the components of an action plan so participants can apply the process to selected problem areas.
Setting:	Total group
Materials:	Handout of action plan components
Method:	Distribute the worksheet listing the components of an action plan. Review the meaning of each component and stress the importance of formulating the basic content of a plan before leaving today's meeting. Give an example of an action plan that could work, but be careful not to take over the task. (The worksheet master is on page 19. The appropriate number of copies should be duplicated before the workshop.) Next, participants should divide into groups to work on developing action plans according to their interests. An effort should be made to have at least one group draw up an action plan to deal with each of the common concerns. Some groups may want to tackle more than one. One group at the pilot workshop tackled them all! The workshop leader should assign locations for each group and ask the groups to choose a facilitator to present their plan at the end of an hour. If some people prefer to work alone, they should be permitted to do so.

Activity:	Planning
Time:	60 minutes
Description:	Small groups develop action plans
Purpose:	To prepare a detailed outline of action that will be undertaken to alleviate a specific problem.
Setting:	Small Groups
Materials:	Action plan worksheets
Method:	The facilitators will wander from group to group clarifying, as needed, the process of developing an action plan with specific strategies for implementation. Group work is encouraged because it is hoped that the action plans will be taken back to the participants' local area or school where highly specific efforts can take place and real differences can be made on behalf of exceptional children.

Activity: Final Reporting and Summary

Time: 30 minutes

Description: Group representatives present action plans.

Purpose: To share each action plan with the total group.

Setting: Total group

Materials: Flip charts and felt markers (to be available to the group representatives as aids in their presentations)

Method: Representatives chosen by each group should present a statement of the problem to be solved and a description of the activities in the action plan. Within each action plan should be a method for deciding whether or not the problem was sufficiently addressed, and if not, what further steps should be taken.

For example, if the problem was that the educator did not adequately explain educational terminology used in a child's IEP and the parents were confused by the jargon, a way of evaluating whether the action plan sufficiently solved the problem is to develop an anonymous survey for parents to reflect on the clarity of the IEP. Depending on the results of the survey, the action plan could be reworked, adjusted, or could stay the same.

After the groups have presented their action plans, the workshop leader should try to sum up the day's activities, emphasizing the progress that has been made, the importance of follow-up, and the need for continued effort. Have the participants fill out evaluation forms before leaving. The master evaluation form is on pages 22 and 23.

PARENT AND TEACHER CONCERNS

Parent Concerns

- Having a preconception that teachers are experts and that parents are inferior.
- Need for more information.
- Reluctance to take initiative.
- Feelings of ignorance about how the system works.
- Feeling defensive.
- Feeling nervous.
- Relying on the professional to give important details about the child.
- Not expressing feelings out of fear of being misinterpreted or being seen as threatening to the teacher.
- Afraid to interfere with teacher-student relationship.
- Reluctance to criticize teacher in child's presence for fear of influencing the child's opinion of the teacher.
- Failure to follow through.
- Lack of dissemination of information.

Teacher Concerns

- Fear of dealing with noncaring or nonunderstanding parents.
- Fear of accountability: this affects how we deal with parents, i.e., making promises, saying what we feel.
- Feeling intimidated by too many professionals at IEP meetings.
- Feeling that sometimes we can't be honest.
- Scheduling limitations cause certain omissions in program.
- Forgetting to communicate, record, and provide feedback.
- Frustration that some things don't get done because of a lack of time or organization.
- Required paperwork forces communication with parents to take a back seat.

Teacher Concerns (continued)

- Because of the system, the IEP meeting is almost "after the fact."
- Use of jargon (don't like to).
- Lack of finesse; distress when things don't sound right.
- Underrating of parents' abilities.
- Forgetting that the child goes home to the parents—he or she does not "belong" to the teacher.
- Feelings of sympathy for parents, especially when:
  a. More than one child is handicapped
  b. Child is identified late
- Fear that parents think their child isn't doing well because of our teaching, so we tend to keep our distance.
- Tendency to "pass the child along" rather than disappoint parents.
- Not knowing "where parents are at" concerning their ability to understand what we say.

COMMON AND GREATEST CONCERNS

Common Concerns

1. Seeing each other in stereotyped roles.
2. Time limitations.
3. Need for open communication.
4. Unclear expectations.
5. Need to define responsibilities and capabilities of each.
6. Tendency to underestimate each other.
7. Use of jargon.
8. Transporation and distance.
9. Fear of blame.
10. Fear of offending the other.

Greatest Concerns

The need for open communication.

Need to define responsibilities.

Seeing each other in stereotyped roles.

Lack of dissemination of information.

ACTION PLAN DEVELOPMENT

Begin with the result you would most like to accomplish. What will your first step be? When and who will take it? What can you foresee as sensible next steps? How will you know when your plan is achieved? Where will you turn for advice and assistance?

Action Steps: What has to be done?	Who will do it?	How and when?
1.		
2.		
3.		
4.		
5.		
6.		

Can you foresee a realistic target date for reaching this goal?
(Use additional sheets if necessary.)

ACTION PLAN EVALUATION

The problem to be addressed in this action plan is: _____

_____

_____

_____

Here are some possible ways to evaluate the action plan's success:

- Survey persons affected by and/or involved with the action plan.
- Interview persons affected by and/or involved with the action plan.
- Solicit letters from those affected by the action plan.
- Observe persons affected by the action plan.
- Keep records of changes resulting from the action plan.
- Meet as a group to discuss expected and unexpected results of the action plan.

Evaluation Strategy(ies)	Person(s) Responsible	Completion Date(s)

WHERE CAN YOU TURN FOR ADVICE AND ASSISTANCE?

Consider other people and organizations that may be sympathetic or supportive of your action idea. List these resources. How can they strengthen your efforts?

Resources	How Can They Help?
1.	
2.	
3.	
4.	
5.	
6.	
7.	
8.	
9.	

POST-WORKSHOP OPINION SURVEY

Please take a few minutes to give us your opinion about the workshop. Your comments will help us make revisions so that parents and teachers get the most out of future workshops of this kind.

1. Why did you come to this workshop?

2. Did you get what you expected from it?

3. What would you have liked to include in this workshop that was not covered?

4. Was there any activity that you think should not have been included?

5. What was the most useful part of the day for you?

6. Did any of the subjects make you feel uncomfortable? If so, please list them.

7. Did any of the activities feel incomplete?

8. Do you believe this kind of exchange helps to build good relationships between parents and teachers?

9. Will you do anything new or differently as a result of this workshop?

10. Do you think that more would have been accomplished if you had met for two successive days?

11. Would you have attended a workshop of this type for two successive days?

12. Do you think others would be willing to do so?

Any other comments?

Are you a ___Parent ___Teacher

Please do not sign your name.

Thank you.

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